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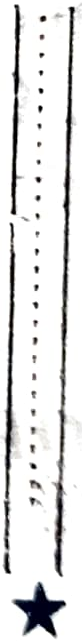

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THE UPANISHADS

THE UPANISHADS form the basis of the Vedantic Philosophy in all its three categories of Dwaita or Dualism, Visishtadwaita or Qualified Non-dualism, and Adwaita or Non-dualism, the main exponents of which are respectively, Madhwacharya, Ramanujacharya, and Sankaracharya. It is mentioned in some of our Puranas that the Upanishads number in all, one thousand one hundred and seventynine; twentyone in Rk. Veda; one hundred and eight in Yajur Veda, one thousand in Sama Veda, and fifty in Atharva Veda. Out of these, 273 Upanishads are said to have been traced so far. Muktikopanishad belonging to the Sukla Yajur Veda mentions a list of 108 Upanishads classified under the different

Vedas. (See Appendix). From among these, ten are accepted to be the principal Upanishads probably because Sankara the first commentator on the Upanishads chose to comment only upon these ten. The place of Sankara in Indian Philosophy is so firmly rooted that subsequent Acharyas or Scholars have all only tried either to support or refute his theory, nobody getting the better while they attempted the refutation of the doctrines laid down by him.

VEDANTA

The philosophy discussed in the Upanishads is generally known as "Vedanta". This is probably because the Upanishads in general come towards the end of the respective Vedas, though there are exceptions to this rule like the Isavasya

Upanishad which occurs in the Samhita portion of the Sukla Yajur Veda. Thus they form the end portion of the Vedas i. e. "Veda-anta" or they can also mean the "end" of the Vedas where the philosophy that points out to the goal or end of the Vedas is discussed. They can also mean "Vedam-tam" the essence of the Vedas. But the most impressive definition of 'Vedanta' seems to be

(the irrefutable conclusions arrived at by, and in, the Vedas together form the Vedanta) and it is accepted by all schools that the Upanishads expound the philosophy of the Vedas.

Says Swami Abhedananda: "The fundamental principle of Vedanta is Oneness. There is one Existence, one Life, one Spirit, one Being in the Universe. The Idea of separateness is unreal.

Vedanta does not teach, as some people think, that the phenomenal world is a mere illusion, but it teaches that the underlying reality of the Universe is the Absolute Being which is One and one without a second—"Ekam eva adwiteeyam". This Absolute Being is called by various names, "Ekam Sat, viprah bahudha vadanti".

UPANISHADS—MEANING

The title "Upanishad" is a combination of three words "Upa-ni-shad" meaning "near-below-sit" which denotes the relationship between the teacher and the taught. This means that the Upanishads contain the knowledge received by the student sitting at the feet of the master. Sankara gives an elaborate explanation regarding the derivation of the term

"Upanishad" in his introduction to the commentary on Kathopanishad, where he says by a series of etymological connections, the word "Upanishad" stands for the knowledge called "Brahmavidya" which removes, shatters or destroys, Avidya-(ignorance of the Reality or lack of discrimination between the changing phenomenon and the changeless noumenon or spiritual blindness).

The authorship of the Upanishads cannot precisely be conferred upon any single person though in general we can only say that they are the result of the Transcendental experiences of the ancient Rishis of this land, who in their infinite mercy for posterity tried to express the inexpressible which they had experienced. As the Infinite is beyond words and expression, they cannot be said to have

expressed fully whatever they wanted to express. Hence the deep suggestiveness of the Upanishadic language. They never cared to subscribe their names to these monumental works as they were men who had gone beyond the concept of individuality, names, forms and all such limitations.

Most of the Upanishads follow the typical style of the seeker questioning and the Master answering. They have a style of their own. The Masters seem to understand and in most cases anticipate or divine the difficulties of the students and try to come down to their level and lift them up from where they are. In some Upanishads stories and examples are employed to convey the subtle ideas which could not be conveyed so effectively otherwise.

TURN INWARDS

Swami Vivekananda says :

"Strength, strength is what the Upanishads speak to me from every page. This is the one great thing to remember, it has been the one great lesson I have been taught in my life, Strength, it says strength, O man ! be not weak Are there no human weaknesses ?—says man. There are, say the Upanishads, but will more weakness heal them, would you try to wash dirt with dirt ? Will sin cure sin, weakness cure weakness ? It is the only literature in the world where you will find the word "abhih" "fearless" used again and again; in no other scripture in the world is this adjective applied either to God or to man And the Upanishads are the great mine of strength. Therein

lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world. The whole world can be vivified, made strong, energised through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable and the down-trodden of all races, all creeds, all sects, to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom—physical freedom, mental freedom and spiritual freedom,—are the watchwords of the Upanishads'

Swami Vivekananda continues : "The book from which to learn Religion is your own mind and heart. The sage is often ignorant of physical science, because he reads the wrong book-the Book within-and the Scientist is too often ignorant of Religion because he too reads the wrong book—the Book without" (Complete works, Fifth Edition, Vol. VI Page 47).

The Upanishads are an impressive record of this reading of the "Book within" and is a part of the Sruties. The Sruties deal with the eternal principles and hold good for all time and all places while the Smrities deal with the practical application of those eternal principles according to changing times. In fact there is a Sruti content and Smriti content in every religion. In the words of Sankara, the Sruties contain "Vastu tantra jnana" (Knowledge of the Reality) and the Smrities contain "Purusha tantra jnana" (Knowledge depending on the person) which can be altered or modified by human effort. And what the Upanishads expound is the "Vastu tantra jnana" which is otherwise called "Brahma Vidya".

THE PRINCIPAL UPANISHADS

Though the subject matter of all the ten principal Upanishads is basically the same, viz. Brahmavidya or enquiry into the nature of the Supreme Reality, and the means and methods of realisation of, or identification with, the Infinite, the handling of the subject differs from one Upanishad to another depending on the master and the student or students in each case, and the method employed in presenting the subtle theme. For a gist of each of the ten principal Upanishads, we can do no better than quote the cryptic, concise, yet comprehensive words of Swami Ranganathananda :—

1. Isavasyopanishad :

The ISA UPANISHAD embodies in its very opening verse the central theme

of all the Upanishads, namely, the spiritual unity and solidarity of all existence (Isaavasyam idam sarvam yat kincha jagatyam jagat).

2. Kenopanishad :

The Kena illumines the nature of knowledge by pointing out the eternal knower behind all acts of knowing, and purifies man's concept, of ultimate reality, of all touch of finitude and relativity by revealing its character as the eternal Self of man and the Self of the Universe.

3. Kathopanishad :

The Katha holds a special fascination for all students of the Upanishads for its happy blend of charming poetry, deep mysticism, and profound philosophy; it

contains a more unified exposition of Vedanta than any other single Upanishad, its charm is heightened by the two characters of its dialogue, namely old Yama the teacher and young Nachiketa the student.

4. Prasnopanishad :

The Prasna as its name implies, is an Upanishad of questions, each of its six chapters comprises a question asked by each of a group of six inquiring students on various aspects of Vedanta and the answers given by their teacher the sage Pippalada.

5. Mundakopanishad :

The Mundaka, after classifying all knowledge into Para the higher and

Apara the lower, and describing all Science, Art, Literature, Politics and Economics-in fact all positive knowledge, the knowledge of the changeful many-as Apara, and boldly including even the holy Vedas and all sacred books in this category. proclaims *that one knowledge as para* "by which the imperishable changeless reality of the One behind the many is realised". And the Upanishad sings in ecstacy the glorious vision of the One in the many·

6. Mandookya Upanishad :

In the brief compass of its twelve verses of condensed thought, the Mandookya surveys the whole experience through a study of the three states of waking, dream, and dreamless sleep, and reveals the Atman, the true Self of man, the

Turiya or the Fourth, as it puts it, as pure Consciousness, eternal and non-dual. It proclaims in its second verse, the infinite dimension of man in a pregnant utterance—one of the four Mahavakyas or "Great Utterances" of the Upanishads: AYAM ATMA BRAHMA—This Atman (Self of man) is Brahman.

7. Taittiriya Upanishad :

The Taittiriya, after majestically proclaiming that 'the knower of Brahman attains the Supreme' (Brahmavid apnoti param) describes the five *kosas* or sheaths that enclose and hide Brahman, and demonstrates the technique of piercing these sheaths of relativity and finitude with a view to reaching the Infinite and the Eternal at the core of experience. It also provides a scientific definition of

Brahman as 'That from which all these beings are born, by which, after being born, they live, and into which they merge when they 'cease to be.'

8. Aitareya Upanishad :

The Aitareya establishes the spiritual character of the Absolute through a discussion of the nature of the Self of man, and proclaims this truth in another of the four Mahavakyas "PRAJNANAM BRAHMA" : 'Brahman is pure Consciousness.'

9. Chhandogya Upanishad :

The Chhandogya introduces us to charming truthseekers like Satyakama, Svetaketu, and Narada, and outstanding spiritual teachers like Aruni, Sanatkumara

and Prajapati. Through several illuminating teacher-student dialogues. the Upanishad helps us to discriminate the reality of being from the appearance of becoming. In a brief utterance of deep philosophical and spiritual import, treated as another of the four Mahavakyas, it sings in refrain, the divinity of man "TAT TWAM ASI" (That Thou Art). It prescribes a knowledge of this innate divinity of man as The one remedy for the deeper ills of life. 'TARATI SOKAM ATMAVIT'—'The knower of the Atman crosses all sorrow'. In its profoundly human episode of the discipleship of Indra under Prajapati, it instructs us in the true nature and technique of man's spiritual quest and the blessings that flow from spirituality. It is an impressive account of man's spiritual education, his growth from worldliness to spirituality It points

out the limitations of materialism as a philosophy of life and the evils that flow from it.

10. Brhadaranyaka Upanishad:

TheBrhadaranyaka, the longest of the Upanishads, is, as its name implies, a big (brhat) forest (aranya) of philosophical thought and spiritual inspiration. Four outstanding personalities illumine its pages : two men and two women : Janaka the philosopher-king, Yagnavalkya the philosopher sage, Maitreyi, the deeply spiritual wife of Yagnavalkya, and Gargi the Vachaknavi "the gifted woman-speaker and philosopher", who is foremost amongst the questioners of Yagnavalkya in philosophical debate. The Upanishad majestically expounds through its fascinating dialogues conducted by these outstanding and other lesser personalities, the central theme of all the Upanishads namely, the divinity of man and

the spirituai solidarity of the whole universe in Brahman. It contains another of the four Mahavakyas, (1.4.10) namely "AHAM BRAHMA ASMI"—'I am Brahman' besides the 'AYAM ATMA BRAHMA' of the Mandookya already referred to. It dares to characterise Brahman as 'the fearless', and presents its realisation by man as the attainment, *here and now* of the state of absolute fearlessness and fulness of delight.

THE MAHAVAKYAS

The quintessence of the Vedantic philosophy is found in the four great declarations (Mahavakyas) of the four Vedas. They are ranged in the following ascending order in four Upanishads, belonging to the four different Vedas.

1. PRAGNANAM BRAHMA — "CONSCIOUSNESS IS BRAHMAN"– This Mahavakya occurs in the Aitareya Upanishad belonging to Rk. Veda.

2. TAT TWAM ASI—"THAT THOU ART"—Occurs in Chhandogya Upanishad belonging to Sama Veda.

3. AYAM ATMA BRAHMA—"THIS SELF IS BRAHMAN"—Occurs in Mandookya Upanishad belonging to Atharva Veda.

4. AHAM BRAHMA ASMI—"I AM BRAHMAN'— Occurs in Brhadaranyaka Upanishad belonging to Yajur Veda.

The first Mahavakya gives an objective definition of truth. It declares that the Consciousness, the Spiritual core which

makes ones personality layers dynamic and active, is the Consciousness that pulsates in all beings and pervades everything and everywhere.

The second Mahavakya is addressed by a Master to a disciple after having defined that Brahman is Consciousness. He declares the greatest truth "THAT THOU ART, Oh ! disciple ! that Brahman which is nothing but Consciousness, is not yonder in the clouds to be achieved as a posthumous reward, but it is right *Here and now* to be experienced as the Atman within your real Self.

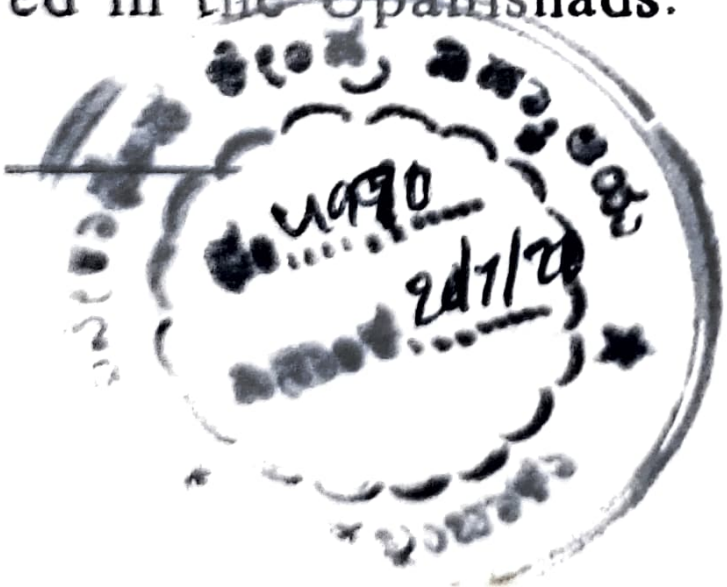
After hearing the definition of Brahman and after having understood from his Master that he is, in essence, nothing other than Brahman, the seeker retires to

a quiet place, shut off from worldly cares, to meditate upon the objective truth that "Self is Consciousness". Ere long he realises that "THIS SELF IS BRAHMAN". Having decided for himself from his own personal solitary and tranquil meditation that this Atman is Brahman; the student comes back to the Master and to the looks of enquiry of the Master, answers with the cheer that beams out of his limpid eyes of peace and serenity, that he had intimately experienced the Truth and he is living with the constant awareness of the Truth "I am Brahman".

Thus in the first two Mahavakyas we find the definition of Truth and the relationship between Truth and Man. The other two give us an assurance that Truth is realised not partially but totally.

Conclusion :

VEDANTA therefore explains the mysteries of man and the Universe. It points out the unseen string that holds together the heterogeneous phenomena—it makes man understand what he is now and what he should really be. It gives him the key to open the gates of the Kingdom of heaven that lies within. Vedanta bridges the gulf between man and God. It is this knowledge that is discussed authoritatively in the Upanishads. In the words of Bloomfield, "There is no important form of Hindu thought, heterodox Budhism included, whieh is not rooted in the Upanishads."



SANTI PADHA

The efficacy of prayer has been accepted by all the religions, because all religions are based on: devotion to the Supreme, Ethics and Righteousness. Prayer is the foundation on which these great qualities can be built up.

Every Upanishad opens with a 'Santi Padha', which is an invocation or prayer sung by the Master and the student together for the successful and uninterrupted conclusion of the studies. It is seen that generally Upanishads belonging to the same Veda have the same Santi Padha. So, from the particular Santi Padha with which an Upanishad begins, it can be decided to which Veda it belongs—The following are the five Santi Padhas (Yajurveda has two branches and hence five Santi Padhas

for the four Vedas) found at the commencement of the Upanishads belonging to the different Vedas along with their meanings in concise form. These are not only to be read or heard, but are to be reflected upon with faith and devotion to enable the seeker to spiritually evolve towards the summum bonum of human birth and existence—Realisation here and now as proclaimed by the Upanishads.

1. **Rig Veda : (See Aitareya Upanishad)**

Aum van me manasi pratisthita, mano me vaci pratisthitam, aviravir me edhi, Vedasya ma anisthah. Srutam me ma prahasih anenadhitenahoratran sandadhami. Rtam vadisyami, Satyam vadisyami tanmam avatu, tad vaktaramavatu, avatu mam, avatu vaktaram.

Aum, santih, santih, santih.

Om! May my speech be rooted in my mind, may my mind be rooted in my speech; Brahman! reveal Thyself to me. Oh! Mind and Speech: enable me to grasp the Truth that the Vedas teach. Let not what I have heard forsake me, Let me continuously live my days and nights in my studies. I think Truth. I speak Truth. May that Truth protect me. May that protect the teacher. Protect me. Protect the teacher. Protect the teacher. Om. Peace. Peace, Peace Peace.

2. **Sukla Yajur Veda** (See Isavasya Upanishad)

Aum, purnamadah purnamidam purnatpurnamudacyate. purnasya purnamadaya purnamevavasisyate.

Aum, santih, santih, santih

That is full. This is full. From the full the full has become manifest. From

the full when the full is negated what remains is again the full, (Infinity minus Infinity is again the Infinity).

3. **Krishna Yajur Veda** : (See Kathopanishad)

Aum, sahanavavatu saha nau bhunaktu, saha viryam karavavahai, tejasvinavadhitamastu ma vidvisavahai.

Aum, santih, santih, santih.

Let Him protect us both. May He bless us with the bliss of knowledge. Let us exert together. May what we study be well studied. May we not hate (quarrel) with each other.

In some Krishna Yajur Veda Upanishads we also find the Santi Padha.

3 (a) Aum sam no mitrah sam varunah sam no bhavatvaryama. Sam na indro brhaspatih. Sam no visnururukramah.

Namo brahmane. Namaste vayo. tvameva pratyaksam brahmasi tvameva pratyaksam brahma vadisyami. rtam vadisyami. satyam vadisyami. tan mama vatu. tadvaktaramavatu. avatu mam. Avatu vaktaram.

Aum, santih, santih, santih.

(See Taittireeya Upanishad)

May Mitra be propitious to us. May Varuna bless us. May the blessings of Aryama be with us. May the grace of Indra and Brhaspati be upon us. May Vishnu the All Pervading be propitious to us. Salutations to Brahman. Salutations to Thee ! Oh ! Vayu ! Thou art the visible

Brahman, Thee alone shall I consider as the visible Brahman. I shall declare : Thou art the 'right'. Thou art the 'Good'. May That protect me, May That protect the Speaker. Please protect me, Please protect the speaker. Om Santi Santi Santi.

4. **Sama Veda** : (See Kena Upanishad)

Aum, apyayantu mamangani vak pranascaksuh. srotramatho balamindriyani ca sarvani sarvam brahmopanisadam. maham brahma nirakuryam ma ma brahma nirakarodanirakaranam, astva-nirakaranam me'stu. Tadatmani nirate ya upanisatsu dharmaste mayi santu, temayi santu.

Aum, santih, santih, santih.

May my limbs, speech, prana, eye, ear, strength of all my senses grow

vigorous. Everything is the Brahman of the Upanishads. May I never deny the Brahman.

May the Brahman never spurn me. May there be no denial of the Brahman. May there be no spurning by the Brahman. Let all the virtues recited by the Upanishads repose in me delighting in the Atman. May they in me repose. Om Santi Santi Santi.

5. **Atharva Veda** : (See Prasna, Mundaka and Mandookya Upanishads)

Aum, bhadram karnebhih srunuyama deva bhadram pasyemaksabhiryajatrah. sthirairangaistustuvamsastanubhirvyasema devahitam yadayuh.

svasti na indro vrddhasravah, svasti nah pusa visvavedah, svasti nastarksyo

aristanemih, svasti no brhaspatirdad-hatu.

Aum, santih, santih, santih.

Oh ! ye Gods ! May we always hear with our ears, what is auspicious. Oh ! worshipful ones, may we with our eyes see only what is auspicious. May we live the entire length of our allotted life hale and hearty, offering our praises unto thee.

May Indra the ancient and the famous, Pooshan (Sun) the all-knowing, the Lord of Swift motion (Vayu) who saves us from all harms, and Brhaspati who protects the spiritual wealth in us, bless us with the intellectual strength and acumen to understand the scriptures and the heroic heart to follow their teachings.
OM Santi Santi Santi

APPENDIX

Muktikopanishad gives a list of 108 Upanishads classified under the different Vedas, as under :—

Rk. Veda (10)

Aitareya, Mudgala, Kaushitaki, Akshamalika, Nadabindu, Tripuratapini, Atmabodha, Soubhagyalakshmi, Nirvana, Bahruca.

Sukla Yajur Veda (19)

Isavasya, Subala, Brhadaranyaka, Mantrika, Jabala, Niralamba, Hamsa, Trisikhibrahmana, Paramahamsa, Mandalabrahmana, Advayataraka, Tarasara, Paingala, Yajnavalkya, Bhiksuka, Sadhyayaniya, Turiyatita, Muktika, Adhyatma.

Krishna Yajur Veda (32)

Kara, Tejobindu Taittiriya Dhyanabindu Brahma Brahmavidya Kaivalya Yogatatwa Swetaswatara Dakshinamurti Garbha Skanda Narayana Sareeraka Amritabindu Yogasikha Amritanada Ekaksara Kalagnirudra Aksi Ksurika Avadhuta Sarvasara

Kadha Sukarahasya Rudrahrudaya Yogakundali Varaha Panchabrahma Kalisantarana Pranagnihotra Saraswatirahasya

Sama Veda (16)

Kena Mahopanishad Chhandogya Sanyasa Arunika Kundika Maitrayani Savitri Maitreyi Rudrakshajabalam Vajrasuchi Vajra Yogachudamani Darsana Vasudeva Jabali

Atharava Veda (31)

Prasna Brhadjabala Mundaka Nrusimhatapini Mandookya Naradaparivrajaka Atharvasira Seeta Atharvasikha Sarabha Tripad vibhuti Mahanarayana Tripuratapini Devi Ramarahasya Bhavana Ramatapini Bhasma jabala Sandilya Ganapati Paramahamsa parivrajaka Mahavakya Gopalatapana Annapoorna Krishna Surya Hayagreeva Atmopanishad Dattatreya Pasupatabrahma Garuda Parabrahma

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